5760

The SmokeChasers Summer

by

Mick Clumpner

To U.S. Forest Service Staff
Missoula, Montana -
from the Author
Mick Clumpner

THE SMOKECHASER'S SUMMER

By

Mick Clumpner

Cover Design & Drawings
by
Colleen Condon

This follows the Lookout's life by one year. 1933.
Sketches are from snapshots taken by me - mick -

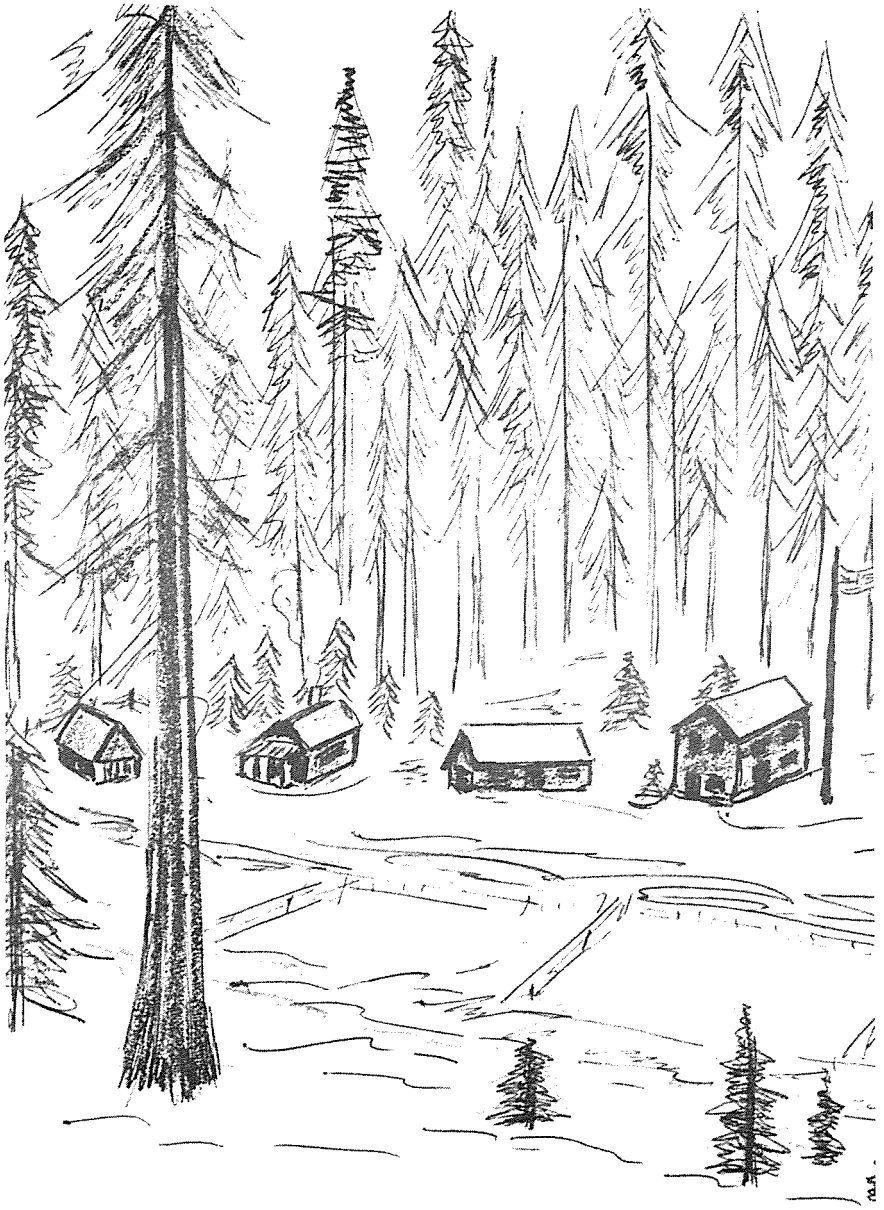
....Dedicated to the Rangers, Lookouts and Guards, Packers, and all Fire Fighters in the old Honeysuckle and Magee ranger districts in the Coeur d'Alene National Forest, Region One...all those who worked there from 1930 to 1940 when roads were few and fires were many....

Mick Clumpner
Sebastopol, California
August 15, 1978

THE SMOKECHASER'S SUMMER

I received a letter from the ranger, George Haynes,
At Honeysuckle Station in the Coeur d'Alenes.
He had a job waiting for a college guy,
Soon as the sun kissed winter good-bye.
I was to grease my boots and fill my pack,
For I'd be there until fall drove me back.

I welcomed the letter, for I needed the dough,
And talked with the profs, eager to go.
I took the night train to my little home town,
Where I reached up in the rafters and pulled my pack down.
I filled it with clothes and greased my old boots,
Heard a train whistle a couple of toots,
Then rolled into bed, happy to know
That tomorrow I'd be making tracks in the snow.



HoneySuckle Ranger Station 1931

Clumpner

I hiked over the pass where pack mules made
A trail through the snow in the hemlock's shade.
The old log cabin was pleasant to see,
Where only a few men were waiting for me.
Hulse was there to assist Haynes, the ranger,
Cyr the packer, Joe Goetz and Taft--no one a stranger.
Last man in camp, I was to do all the cooking,
Until a new man came in; I was sure to keep looking.

And sure enough, before the end of the day
More fellows came in for the summer's pay.
The bunkhouse filled fast for there was work to do,
And each day that dawned, out went a crew
To follow the miles of telephone lines,
And clear the trails through the district confines.
We worked from the station and rode back at night,
Till we cleared us a trail to each cabin site.

With all the crews started in less than a week,
Haynes set up a Bug Camp on far Leaburg Creek.
Hulse was the boss, and Mike Maloche the cook,
We were a bug-chasing crew sent in for a look
For the nasty pine beetle, pinus dendrocnes by name,
But to some city guys all bugs looked the same.
They soon knew the difference and when put to the test,
Our bug-spotting crews soon were the best.

Clumpner

In a couple of weeks Leaburg was done,
And Hulse put an end to our springtime fun.
"Boys, we'll be finished at the end of the week.
We're moving this outfit to work on Barney Creek.
She's a snow-digging chance, the boss is Joe Geotz,
The river is up, and no chance for boats."
Old Joe was known as a tough son-of-a-gun,
And working for him wasn't cut out for fun.

We hiked twelve miles into the station
Where Haynes quickly ended our spring vacation.
"Boys, she's going to be a rough old show,
The river is up and you'll have to dig snow;
But set up the tents and cut boughs for your bed,
Now don't stand around--take off!" the ranger said.
We all grabbed some grub to eat on the way,
Knowing we had started a long, dreary day.

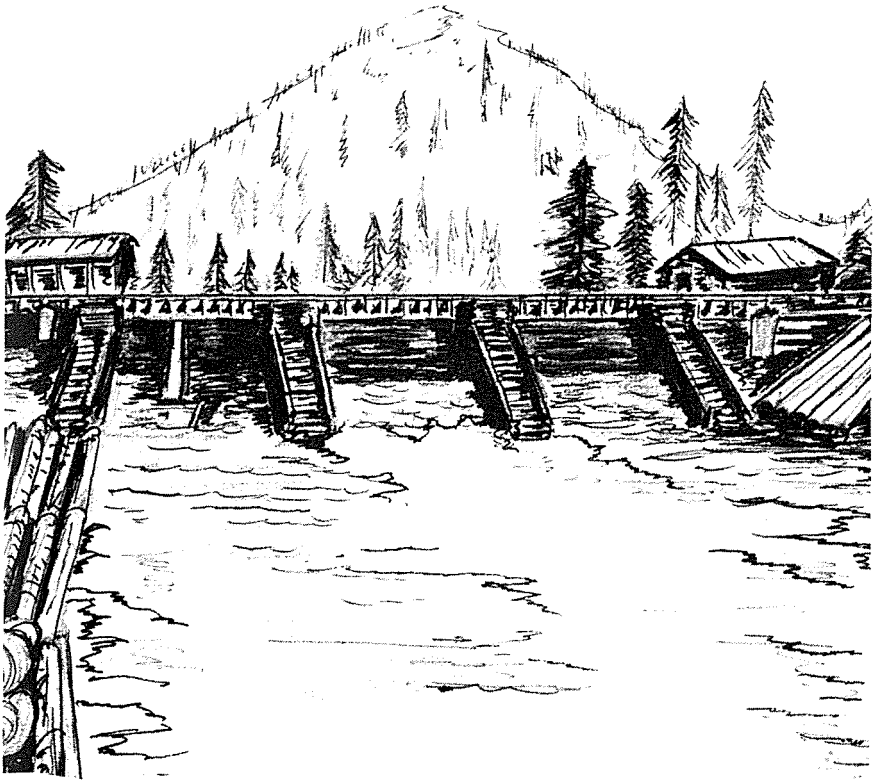
I picked up my pack to go with the bunch,
But Haynes called me back. "Mick, fix a lunch,
And while you're doing it, I've something to say.
You've got a new job without added pay."
"What's the deal, George? Something that's new?"
"Now keep your shirt on--here's what you do,
You go on up to camp and work with old Joe,
He's a bearcat for work--you'll make it go."

Clumpner

"Hell, George, why pick on me? I don't like it a bit,
Joe sees me coming, he'll throw a fit."
"Now settle down, boy. I'll handle Joe.
"He's got to have help up there in the snow.
"You keep the time, figure the costs two weeks ahead.
"You'll make out fine." That's all that he said.
We all of us knew Joe, he was rough as a cob,
And if I wasn't so broke I'd've quit the damn job!

Madder than hell, I took out on the trail,
Following the crew in the rain and the hail.
The North Fork was up, the footlog was gone,
A packstring came by and I climbed on.
The Barney Creek camp was a dismal place,
Where even Maloche had a scowl on his face.
The cook tent was up, with the crew shoveling snow,
I was pouring some coffee when in came old Joe.

"Mick, yer sure late. Git that java down quick,
I'm going out now, so you hit her a lick.
Git the tents up, you kin shack up with me,
There's more mules a-coming, they'll be here by three.
The blankets are on 'em. Have the fellers cut brush.
No mattresses coming, so they'll bed in the slush."
So we got the tents up with boughs being cut,
Every man working with a long empty gut.



Breakwater Dam

Clumpner

The trees dripping water and smoke hanging low,
Tents were now up, with sidewalls of snow.
The cock-shop lamp lit the white canvas walls,
While a tired hungry crew awaited the squalls
Of the cook, Mike Maloche, who was burning the chuck
For a bug-chasing crew fresh out of luck.
Old Joe came steaming in, wet to the knees,
Put his axe down and gave a loud sneeze.

We ate in a hurry to get the job done,
Then crawled into bed, another day gone.
Joe said to me, "Mick, you done fine,
You do your job, and I'll handle mine.
You stick with me, and we'll make it go.
We'll make a team--Mick and Old Joe."
So we ran the camp together, that long-ago spring,
Till one night in camp I heard the phone ring.

"Mick, you and Old Joe can close the camp down,
Come into the station, you can go into town.
For the job you have done, I'll give you two days
To get your hair cut and see different ways."
What could I do in such a short time?
Get a haircut and shave for four bits and a dime?
Than take in a show with a lonesome girl,
So the time went in a dizzying whirl.

Clumpner

So back to a summer in the Coeur d'Alenes,
Where once more I listened to the Ranger, George Haynes.
"I want you to go to Breakwater Dam,
To stay there and work on the trails for Old Sam.
You can work there and wait for a fire to break out,
And it will happen, don't you ever doubt!"
So I was sold downriver like a runaway black,
To cook and to live in a lousy dam shack.

The hot August days came around all too soon,
And smoke from fires reddened the moon
That filled the valleys with smoky haze
And veiled the sun and the lookout's gaze.
Then the storm came up from down in the south,
And a strike started a fire near the North Fork's mouth.
I got the call to take out and go,
While I cussed the storm that led to my woe.

It rained that night and the fog settled in;
I tried to find the strike again and again.
Morning broke rainy and, wet to the knees,
I hoped to smell smoke on the morning breeze.
I smelled it occasionally, once in a while,
And followed my nose nearly a mile.
I finally came to a burning tree,
With a fire in the top I could plainly see.

Clumpner

The hemlock was rotten clear to the core,
But I'd tackled a few like that once before.
The only help around was poor lonesome me,
So I took my axe and went to the tree.
I put in the undercut facing the hill,
I wanted the tree to fall and lie still.
If it ever started to slide and to roll,
I'd have me a trail of fire in the hole.

With the undercut in and the back-cut begun,
The hot sparks began falling to add to the fun.
Then pieces of bark full of hot fire
Fell all around me to add to my ire.
They fell on my shirt and clung to my back,
One limb came down and gave me a whack.
I wanted to quit, but I didn't dare leave,
So I wiped off the sweat with a scorching sleeve.

I chopped away on the three-foot trunk,
Making a cut like a beaver half-drunk.
Finally she creaked like a rusty hinge,
While more sparks fell to give me a singe.
She tottered and leaned, then fell with a crash,
While another big limb almost settled my hash.
While I looked in dismay at the fallen tree,
She rolled and she turned, and barely missed me.

Clumpner

She slid down the hill like a well-greased shoat,
Scattering fire all over my coat.
I grabbed up the shovel and began throwing dirt,
Forgetting at once the blisters that hurt.
Fire in the grass and fire in the trees,
Running uphill at a breath of a breeze.
Too busy to know I was losing the fight,
Then Charlie Smith came along, a most welcome sight.

He flung off his pack and grabbed up a hoe,
And we built line like working for Slave-driver Joe.
We had her corraled and went to the tree,
Chopping out fire until stung by a bee.
We had opened a swarm deep in the rot,
And soon were surrounded by bees that were hot.
They buzzed us and stung us and about drove us wild,
And the cussing we gave them was not very mild!

When we had the fire slowed and a trench all around,
I found me some shade and flopped on the ground.
Charlie came up with some meat between bread
And while grinning at me, playfully said,
"Mickey, she's all yours, fer I gotta go,
You stick her out and don't let her blow.
We got more hot ones, but Haynes said to check,
So if she gets away now, it's only your neck!"

Clumpner

I was tired, I was burned, and hungry as hell,
But I had to keep working though my nose couldn't smell.
I ate and I rested and greased up my burns,
Then the long day ended as the world turns.
I rested that night on a bear-grass bed,
But arose in the dark for spots showing red.
My morning's dim light no smoke was in sight,
But I turned over spots until day turned into night.

I was just settling down when Bentley came by;
He calmly told me, "Smokey, don't cry.
But we'll call this one out, at least for today.
George sent a message for you to be on the way.
There's a blow-up on Spruce Creek, they're hauling in men
You can take off now, get there when you can.
They'll pick you up at old Camp Number Nine,
I'll stick at the cabin and get along fine."

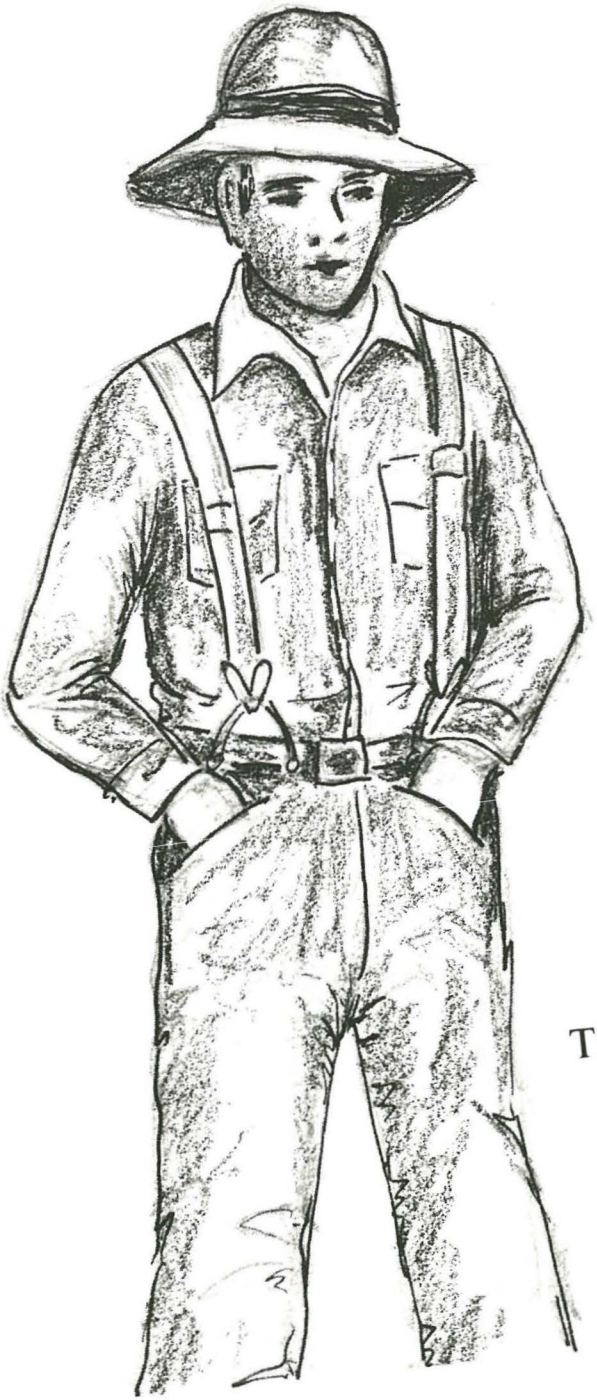
What little I had I put in my pack,
And started the trail to the Breakwater shack,
Where I swam in the dam to clean off the sweat,
And put on clean clothes while still cool and wet.
I grabbed me a bite, put new socks in my pack,
Pulled on my boots and took a sharp axe from the rack.
I headed upriver after ten that night,
To the sight of the lantern in the camp shining bright.

Clumpner

The truck came by long before dawn,
Crowded with men; Gene Woods helped me on.
Two hours later where we stopped the old truck,
We saw the fire glowing red--smokechasers' luck!
We all piled out, grumbling and tired
From a long, dusty ride and the job that we hired.
Woods said to me, "Mick, I know the trail,
So I'll lead the way. You bring the tail."

So we stumbled and fell in the morning dark,
Until we came to a sort of a little park,
Where the creek came close to the edge of the fire,
And Gene could tap the telephone wire.
Then he took ten men and headed uphill,
I took the rest and sorted 'em out till
I was sure they all had the right tools,
With waterbags full, and knew the right rules.

We slashed as we went, cutting a track,
Dropping off men and not looking back,
Crowding the line to the edge of the blaze,
Hoping to head her before many days.
Snags that were burning we cut with the saw,
Used axes and shovels with hands that were raw.
The sun came up bloody red through the smoke,
Then came the breeze as if making a joke.



Tired & Singed

Clumpner

The wind scattered sparks from the tall burning trees
To set new fires to run with the breeze.
Tired as we were, it was "Git 'em out quick!"
We all went after 'em, all except Dick,
Who was bringing water in a five-gallon sack,
And two other bags with the one on his back.
We each took a drink, and went back to the line,
Still trying to head her at a quarter to nine.

Larsen came up with more fighting men,
And gave us a breather, until about ten
We hit her again and all too soon
The wind came up, and that afternoon
The fire took off and started to crown
With a thunderhead white they could see clear from town.
Old Bill came to the place where I lay,
"She's going to hell, Mick. Let's call it a day!"

We rested awhile, kept men on the lines,
And dropped down to the creek, looking for signs
The wind would drop down and give us a break,
So we could head her again. All it would take
Would be a few more hours and a few new men,
And this one would be slowed and corraled once again.
We ate and we talked, and made up a plan;
Bill said, "Boys, we'll fight her tonight the best
that we can."

Clumpner

Before it was dark, we took over the fire
With every kind of man they could hire.
Big ones, thin ones, some slim and tall;
We were going to use them one and all.
That night we worked on the snags and the logs,
Digging and shoveling like badgers and dogs.
When daylight came and we could follow around,
We had a slight trench holding hot, smoky ground.

The job wasn't over, the hard work was due,
To walk in and spread out the smoke-blackened crew,
To dig out and scatter every piece of red coal,
For if the wind came up over the knoll,
We might lose her again and with weary men
We might never corral this one again.
So we dug and we sweat and buried each spark,
Until we rested a bit, there in the dark.

Another day came, smoky and gray,
And we checked off the men, those who would stay;
Woods took his crew, leaving me ten,
So I picked me out the best of the men.
They left us some grub and filed up the trail,
And Mickey once more would bring up the tail.
The men I had knew the work at hand,
And by nightfall no glowing spark could be fanned.

Clumpner

We went over the lines in the dim morning light,
Looking for smoke to end the long fight.
And a few hours later, I was ready to say,
"Fellers, she's dead, let's call it a day.
Kendrick and Moorhead, stay here and make sure,
The rest of us boys'll leave this old hoor
And go for another where Larsen needs help,
So you stick it out until he gives you a yelp."

We climbed the steep trail to the waiting Chev truck,
The driver asleep, and found to our luck,
Water, tobacco, and grub waiting there.
Then I read the brief note, telling me where
The next one was crowning along Grassy Top,
Running like crazy, with no place to stop.
We swore and we grumbled while we rolled along,
Another rude verse in the Smokechaser's Song.

Fire after fire, till our socks wore out,
Shirts were torn, pants were ripped. Stout
As they were, our boots were burned,
Corks dropped out and the toes were upturned.
A ragged crew with hands blistered and raw,
Blackened with smoke, but never a flaw
In the way that they fought every blistering fire,
With courage and guts that money can't hire.

Clumpner

We went over the lines in the dim morning light,
Looking for smoke to end the long fight.
And a few hours later, I was ready to say,
"Fellers, she's dead, let's call it a day.
Kendrick and Moorhead, stay here and make sure,
The rest of us boys'll leave this old hoor
And go for another where Larsen needs help,
So you stick it out until he gives you a yelp."

We climbed the steep trail to the waiting Chev truck,
The driver asleep, and found to our luck,
Water, tobacco, and grub waiting there.
Then I read the brief note, telling me where
The next one was crowning along Grassy Top,
Running like crazy, with no place to stop.
We swore and we grumbled while we rolled along,
Another rude verse in the Smokechaser's Song.

Fire after fire, till our socks wore out,
Shirts were torn, pants were ripped. Stout
As they were, our boots were burned,
Corks dropped out and the toes were upturned.
A ragged crew with hands blistered and raw,
Blackened with smoke, but never a flaw
In the way that they fought every blistering fire,
With courage and guts that money can't hire.

Barber Shop at Camp

Clumpner

So August went by with its blistering days,
And September came on with shimmering haze
Till clouds rolled in from the golden west,
Bringing the rain which we loved the best.
Then into the station to meet my old crew,
Talking and laughing while drinking the brew
That the cook kept waiting in the big coffee pot
On the back of the stove, keeping it hot.

"Fellows, we've got a month's work for you,
Dee Chapin needs a bug-chasing crew.
He's running a camp up on Yellow Dog Creek,
Just opened it up the first of the week.
We can truck you into the Rock City camp,
You can hike downriver while the trail is still damp.
The cook is a good one--Old Ernie Magee;
Don't waste the grub, it doesn't come free."

The camp was a tent show, clear up the creek,
Deep in the shadow of old Grizzly Peak.
It never dried out from the night's drizzly rain,
And each day we fought wet brush again and again.
No mail came our way, and Chapin was cross,
But we put up with his growls--he was the boss.
But I said to Old Ernie, "When the rains turn to snow,
Fix me a lunch, for I'm ready to go."

Clumpner

"Mike, you can't leave now, the job isn't done.
Where will you go? The walk out ain't fun."
"Over the hill, sixty-five miles by trail and by road
Is the place where I live and will dump all my load."
I wanted no arguments, it was my life to lead,
But it upset Old Ernie, who still tried to plead.
But to hell with Old Chapin and his whole lousy crew!
I packed up my rigging, with the money I drew.

The next morning came with snow drifting down,
And I took Ernie's lunch and headed for town.
I climbed Grassy Ridge and followed the trail,
Walking like mad through the snow and the hail.
I came to the road that went to Magee;
Twenty-five miles I'd walked as though free
From a miserable job and with winter coming on
I hiked down the road with rain coming down.

There was smoke rising up from a shack at Camp Ten,
So I kicked open the door and, dripping, went in.
There at the table sat Old Mike Maloche,
Who jumped in surprise. He hollered, "My gosh,
If it ain't Old Mick, wet to the ears,
Who I haven't seen for it seems like years."
I dropped my soaked pack, swept the hat from my head,
And grinned at Old Mike and what he'd just said.

"Mike, you old goat, bring me what grub you've got,
And fill me a cup from that old coffee pot.
I've just bunched her up and quit Chapin's crew,
And I'm headed for home after I drink some more brew."
It was raining outside, I was wet to the skin,
And it was good to see Mike and the shanty again.
While I ate me some grub, we heard an old car
Drive up to the door and set it ajar.

In came two boys from distant Magee,
The rain turned 'em loose, something like me.
We made us some talk as the snow turned to rain,
And we all made a deal to reach Coeur d'Alene.
Mike fed us well and told us good-bye,
He'd see me again when the sun filled the sky.
I piled in the back of the open-air Ford,
And for the rain and the ride I thanked the good Lord.

The summer was ended, I was now headed home,
All the fires were out, no more were to come.
Next spring when winter snowdrifts were low,
I could expect a letter from Haynes or Old Joe,
Saying, "Mickey, you're needed. Grease up those old shoes,
Come into the station with no time to lose."
Again I would head for the far Coeur d'Alenes,
To chase smoke once more and to pray for the rains.

THE END